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## Art Honors the Ancestors

### Creator finds a home in Native American business

BY MINDY COOPER  
THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

One day, a coyote came across a village and asked the leader Tsaglal if her village lived well. "Yes, we do" said the leader. "We have good houses, lots of salmon and lots of berries. Why do you ask?" Coyote said, "Changes are going to come. How will you watch your people?" But the leader said, "I don't know." So with her response, the coyote turned her into a rock, where she has, and is, still watching everyone today.

"You can still go see her," said Lillian Pitt, a Pacific Northwest Native-American artist based in Portland. "She overlooks the village where my great-great grandmother lived."

The story of Tsaglal can be seen on a pictograph from the Columbia River. "This story was the inspiration for my trademark piece," Pitt said, pointing to a mask hanging on the wall in Quintana Gallery, downtown. "Her name is Nixluidix."

Pitt acknowledges the contributions of her ancestors called the River People who have lived around the Columbia River Gorge for more than 12,000 years.

"At the time there was no Washington or Oregon or delineation of the river," she said. "We were all related."

While growing up, Pitt said her parents, feeling the need to protect her from bigotry they experienced as young Native Americans, didn't teach her the ways of her people. "They didn't talk about our history because there was a lot of mistrust," she said. "They [her parents] couldn't speak their language at school or dress traditionally, so my dad

The Indian name Nixluidix is the name of this bronze mask created by Native American Lillian Pitt who was inspired by a story of her ancestors whom have lived in the Columbia River Gorge for over 12,000 years.

PHOTOS BY MINDY COOPER/THE PORTLAND OBSERVER



Northwest Native American Lillian Pitt, 63, stands inside Quintana Gallery, downtown, where her artwork rests on the walls amongst the work of various other Native American artists who share their culture and traditions through their diverse creations.



wanted to protect us."

Today, however, Pitt said she is proud to be a Native-American artist, and she knows her parents would be happy if they could see her art, which encapsulates the traditions and culture, from baskets to legends, of her family's people and the Columbia River Gorge.

Now 67-years-old, Pitt has been a working artist for more than 29-

first touched clay in 1981 at Mt. Hood Community College where "it was love at first touch," she said, smiling.

She remembers, however, when she first began working with the material and wasn't sure what she was going to make. At the time, she said I couldn't throw clay on a wheel because of a bad back. "So I took my clay home, and looked at the wall, and I saw

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—Lillian Pitt, Pacific Northwest Native-American artist

years while living within the city. Throughout her lifetime she has created thousands of handmade creations and public art sculptures through multiple medium, including silver and gold jewelry, print making, bronze sculpture and masks, shadow spirits, and her favorite—clay.

"Portland is a good place to be a Native-American artist," she said. "But I was very lucky to be at the right place at the right time."

Although she considers herself a late-bloomer, Pitt said she

Northwest clay masks," she said. "So I thought—I'll make a mask!"

A lot of her work, she said is also drawn from rock paintings and carvings, which she considers to be a "true inspiration."

Although Pitt recognizes the struggles in becoming a working artist, she said she was very fortunate to have had a lot of support, especially from Navajo artist R.C. Gorman, which she considers "a real blessing."

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